

Swan Song

The stage of an old theatre, shortly after a performance. Bits of scenery, costumes, curtains. An overturned stool.

SVETLOVIDOV: Joke's on me, heh? Hm. All alone. Got drunk and fell asleep and no one was here to laugh at the bit. Good bit, too. Old man drinks too much, falls asleep, wakes up alone. That's funny. Fell asleep in the dressing room. Didn't even lie down. What a talented actor I am. Such imagination. (calling) Yegorka! Petrushka! Where the hell are they? Probably asleep. They sleep like stones, those two. An earthquake couldn't move them. Yegorka! (stops to listen) Nothing. Not even an echo. I tipped them, too, damnit! That's gratitude for you. They have a great time at my party, then lock me up and go home. Probably that's true. I feel like an ox. My final performance, my Benefit, my retirement, and I left this noble profession drinking enough beer and wine and vodka to float a raft. I'm revolting to myself. Feverish. Why not? An old drunk like me? Of course I'm hot and my mouth feels crowded. Crowded with old worn out words, competing tongues, vying for space in the cave of my mouth. (demonstrates) The old reprobate is soused again and doesn't even know it. Whatever mirth I failed to cause during the performance, I am certain to have provoked after. Argh! What a headache. It's freezing in here! Turn on some heat, damnit! Hot, cold, inarticulate, with a head of lead. A fine picture of dignity at the end of an stellar career upon the boards. What a joke. Act your age, old man. Old man. I am an actor, I can act any age I please. I can act it, but will they believe it? Not any more. The years catch up, and a few glasses of wine put you to sleep, when twenty years ago I would be out with the extras, pounding 'em down, buying rounds and feeling no pain. But I can play no young lovers, no fools, no bumpkins no longer. I'm old. Twenty years ago I was forty-eight and in wonderful shape. Now I'm in no shape at all, for anything, least of all pretending to be someone I'm not. Retirement saved me from a life of continued embarrassment, so be glad. Not much left from here on out. The golden years are gone. Only the last, few, bitter drops remain. The dregs, the heeltap, the sediment. Drain the flagon and move on, Death is calling. Death awaits. Life stretches out as before, but now it stretches behind me. Miles and miles of what was, what could have been, what might have been. All in the past. The future is a black pit, like the one before me now. Empty, vast, not even an echo to keep me company. (stops and stares ahead) Odd though. Forty-five years on stage and never in a dark theatre. Not once. No light, no people, no movement of any kind. Quiet. Black. Empty. Void. The only thing I can see out there is the prompter's box, his desk and chair. His book? That's all. Otherwise, a tomb. Yawning wide to receive me. (shivers)

I'm cold. This place creates drafts. It sends chills up my spine. I understand why old stagehands believe in ghosts. I understand perfectly. Yegorka! Petrushka! Where are you?! This place of spirits makes for deadly thoughts at night. No more drinking for me. I'm too old for it. Other people my age spend their evenings in church. They know what's ahead and sensibly prepare. Not me. Not the stupid old actor. I stand here swaying on a black, dark stage entertaining nothing but morbid thoughts. Look at me. Still in costume. What a spectacle. If a ghost came along right now I'd be more ashamed than scared.

He heads for his dressing room just as Nikita Ivanich comes out of the wings dressed in a long, white night robe. Svetlovidov screams.

SVETLOVIDOV: What are you! Who are you? Go away! Don't hurt me!

NIKITA: It's only me.

SVETLOVIDOV: Who's me?

NIKITA: Me. Nikita, the prompter. Just me. How can I possibly hurt you?

SVETLOVIDOV: Damn it to hell, what are you doing here? You scared me!

NIKITA: Please don't tell anyone you saw me here.

SVETLOVIDOV: Nikita?

NIKITA: The prompter. If Alexi Fromich were to find out, I would be in terrible trouble.

SVETLOVIDOV: The prompter?

NIKITA: Nikita. I sleep here.

SVETLOVIDOV: Ivanovich?

NIKITA: The same. I have no where else. I've slept here for years. Please, don't tell anyone. Where would I go if they found out?

SVETLOVIDOV: The prompter. Nikita. I'm relieved that it's you.

NIKITA: Who else did you...?

SVETLOVIDOV: I thought you were a ghost. Sad, yes? Look at me. Dressed like a fool. How appropriate. I got sixteen curtain calls tonight. Sixteen! I was worshiped, admired, applauded until it seemed the plaster might come apart, and what happened? It occurred to no one even to come check where I was when it was all over. I was drunk and asleep in my

dressing room, but I could have been dead for all they care. I'm old, disposable, trash, that's all. My life on stage is over, and it's fitting, too, because my life on earth may as well be finished, too. What an end, Nikita, what a miserable end!

He falls weeping onto Nikita's shoulder.

NIKITA: I've never seen you like this. Maybe it's best if you go home.

SVETLOVIDOV: Home! Where is home? Do I really have a home? My only home is here, just another dust ball stuck up in a rotting curtain. I am rejected, swept under the carpet, ignored and reviled!

NIKITA: I have your address over here, somewhere, in case you can't remember...

SVETLOVIDOV: I have no home! What is my home? What family? There's no one to greet me, no one to love me or cherish me in my old age. I am alone, Nikita. I traded a family of children for a family of ghosts, and now I am forced to live with them. Now, when I crave warmth and company, who do I have? A population of images, people I never loved and who never existed save for a few moments in my own mind. What is there left for a man like me?

NIKITA: Your audience?

SVETLOVIDOV: My audience, where is my audience?

NIKITA: They love you. They have loved you for decades. They are real.

SVETLOVIDOV: Where are they, these lovers of mine? Melted away into the dark, just like the characters I gave life to -- gave *my* life to -- and for what? No one kisses me on the cheek when I open my front door, no one calls me Daddy, no one misses me beside her at night. I may have succeeded at imitating life, for that I may have been admired, but in the real thing I have failed.

NIKITA: If you keep on with this, I'll cry.

SVETLOVIDOV: You're right. No sense in it. I can't change what I've done. What I was. What I was. I was quite a man, Nikita. I was handsome, do you believe it? Taller than I am now, and charming and witty and full of daring and enthusiasm. Mine was a noble family, did you know that Nikita? I served in the army, the artillery. I cut quite a figure in that uniform. Women loved me. Did they love me! They loved me Nikita, and I loved them. And where is it all? Gone! The lights went down and it all vanished, into the darkness. A roar of applause, sixteen curtain calls, and darkness. All of it vanishes out there. But the women, Nikita, the women!